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Bill to loosen leave restrictions for military caregivers

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Federal workers caring for the children of deployed service members would get more liberal leave under a bill introduced Thursday by two senators.

The Military Family Support Act of 2005, cosponsored by Sens. Jim Jeffords, I-Vermont, and Russ Feingold, D-Wis., would not give extra leave to designated caregivers of the children of service members who have deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, but they would be able to use regular and sick leave with fewer restrictions.

Feingold said caregivers “could use accrued annual leave, sick leave, leave banks and other leave available to them” for any purpose related to or resulting from their caregiver status.

A caregiver could be the spouse of the deployed member, a relative or any other person the member has designated to take care of a child while they are away.

The bill, S 1888, orders new federal leave rules to be created by the Office of Personnel Management for federal workers, who would be eligible as long as they are at least 21 years old and have a written designation as the caregiver for a deployed service member. The bill also asks the Labor Department to create a similar voluntary leave program for private businesses.

Feingold is the sponsor of another bill that would modify the Family and Medical Leave Act to give the spouse, parents or other relatives time off work to take care of personal business on behalf of a deployed service member.

He has offered that bill as an amendment to the 2006 defense authorization bill, which the Senate has yet to pass. Under Senate rules, it is too late for Jeffords and Feingold to offer their new proposal as an amendment to the defense bill unless they can get the consent of the entire Senate, which could be possible as Senate leaders try to reach agreement on the fate of the bill.

In a statement, Jeffords said the idea behind the new proposal is to help families deal with the long-term absence of a service member.

“As we support our soldiers serving overseas, we must not forget the enormous sacrifice their families are making here at home,” Jeffords said. “This legislation gives military families some well-deserved flexibility as they face the day-to-day demands of family life with one less set of hands around the home.”

Feingold said he is trying to “bring a small measure of relief to the families of our men and women in uniform as they seek to maintain a sense of normalcy here at home while their loved ones are deployed.”

“Our ongoing, large-scale deployments in Iraq continue to demand so much from our men and women in uniform and their families. Passing this measure is the least we can do,” Feingold said.